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THOMAS R. BARD AND VENTURA COUNTY'S SHEEP INDUSTRY, 1870-1884

BY WALDEMAR WESTERGAARD

California's pastoral age is a time to conjure with. The vast ranchos stretching for leagues over hills and valleys, owned by landed potentates who little dreamed of the vast resources lying undeveloped at their feet, the sleepy towns with their missions and Indians on the one hand, and their landed aristocracy gathered within their precincts on the other, are indeed a far cry from fruit groves and truck gardens, from oil fields and hydraulic gold diggings, from concrete roads and myriad autos, from factory whistles and electric trains. We properly associate the *rancheros* and *vaqueros* with the Spanish and Mexican period of California's history; yet it takes a certain mental effort to conceive of our American founders of California, our Bidwells and Sutters, Blanchards and Bards, as owners of vast herds of cattle, horses and sheep. But our intensive agricultural life did not come into existence at a bound when the Gringos came. The Americans were obliged to build on the economic foundations laid by the Spaniards and Mexicans among whom they settled. The hides and tallow piled on the Santa Barbara wharf, which Dana describes in his "Two Years Before the Mast," did not cease being important simply because of the American conquest.

It is my purpose in this paper to describe the state of affairs in Ventura County at this transitional period, and to do this I shall present the situation largely as it is revealed by the archives of the late Senator Thomas R. Bard, who came to California at the close of the Civil War to look after the oil interests of his Philadelphia employer, Col. Thomas A. Scott, but who used the sheep-raising business as a means of livelihood when the oil prospects looked uncertain, and before men had discovered the possibilities of intensive agriculture.

Sheep and cattle were the bases of Spanish and Mexican economic life. Alexander Forbes, whose book on California was published in 1839, informs his readers that in 1831 California had in its four "jurisdictions" of San Francisco, Monterey, Santa Barbara, and San Diego 153,000 sheep, 216,000 "black" cattle (the only kind he mentions), and 32,000 horses. Of the one hundred and fifty-odd thousand sheep only 12 per cent, or 18,600, were in the Santa Barbara "jurisdiction," which extended as far south as the "Town of la Reyna de los Angeles." The latter was credited with no sheep, but with 38,000 cattle.

With the rapid settlement that followed upon the gold rush, we are not surprised to find the figures for sheep immigration mounting rapidly. The early woolly aliens came mainly from Mexico. A considerable number arrived during the years 1849-51. In 1852, according to Bancroft, 40,000 were imported, and some were sold at \$16.00 a head. In 1853 the number had more than trebled (135,000) and the price dropped to \$9.00. Five years later, namely, in 1858, the figures reach 376,000, and the price drops down to less than \$3.50. After 1860 the traffic stopped, California apparently having become sheep saturated.

But the wool that grew on these alien backs was short and coarse, so with the increasing competition, enterprising Americans began to consider improving the breed. Sheep and cattle have always been considered proper subjects for the application of eugenic principles. Col. W. W. Hollister is credited by Bancroft with introducing the first American sheep in 1853. He later became one of the sheep barons of Santa Barbara County, to whom the lesser lords of the industry hearkened as to one speaking with especial authority.

The business of raising sheep had in it a good deal of the fascination and the risks of speculation. In 1863-64 a terrific drought struck California, and the cattle industry was in danger of being wiped out. The cattle man's extremity was the sheep man's opportunity, for the latter's flock increased at the annual rate of over 80 per cent, and with two clippings yielded over seven pounds of wool from ewes and wethers when the average yield elsewhere in the United States was only four. A veritable hirsute triumph for sunny California!

However, there were flies in the ointment, and like the great symbol of patience, Job, "the greatest of all the men of the east," whose "substance," it will be recalled, "also was 7,000 sheep," the patience of the sheep rancher was frequently taxed. There were other and more material taxes that will be mentioned later. By 1867, when our particular story begins, the subdivision of the ranchos was pretty well under way. At this time agitation was beginning to reach the state legislature looking towards laws designed to make the sheep and cattle ranchers, instead of the farmers, fence in their lands or render themselves liable for trespass. The day of the farmer was at hand. Gradually the sheep men were obliged to withdraw to the remoter hillsides and canyons where feed was scarcer and water supply was more dependent upon natural resources. Burrs from the alfalfa on which they fed got into the wool and lowered its quality, and the sands picked up in the river bottoms during the long dry season increased its weight. An important question for raisers and for dealers in wool

was whether the soil thus acquired by the sheep should be shipped over the brand-new transcontinental lines, or left in California.

Ventura County, which was separated from Santa Barbara County after the close of 1872, was still largely "Spanish" in speech and population when Thomas R. Bard arrived in California in 1865, and indeed for several years thereafter. The ranchos on which Mr. Bard and his associates mainly carried on their sheep raising enterprises were ranchos Los Posas and Simi. The title to Simi was based on three Mexican grants, from 1795 to 1845, the third being made by Governor Alvarado to Jose de la Guerra y Noriega in 1842, and approved by the Mexican Assembly in 1845; that to Rancho Los Posas was made to de la Guerra by Governor Figueroa in 1834. The Los Posas was surveyed by Stow as containing 26,245 acres; the Simi, 114,693 acres; together constituting an area of about 188 square miles, or more than five townships. The land communication with this region was by a stage line that ran from Los Angeles to Santa Barbara, and thence to San Francisco, carrying passengers at twenty cents a mile, just twice the railroad and four times the steamer rates in 1868. When the roads were dusty and the tide was out, the stage drivers frequently sought the beach to the delight of the passengers.

Among the tracts owned by Thomas A. Scott and managed by Mr. Bard were the Calleguas and Colonia ranchos, the former of 6,400 acres, the latter, 13,954.¹ In the year 1866-67 these were assessed at what was considered by the interested parties at the exorbitant rate of fifty cents an acre. The tax rate was \$3.13 per \$100, and the amount for which payment was refused was \$336.34. Before descending into further detail, it might be of interest to hear the names of a few of Ventura's sheep ranchers of the seventies. With Mr. Bard were associated Messrs. J. P. Green (still living and a vice-president of the Pennsylvania Railroad), Logan Kennedy, a boyhood acquaintance of Mr. Bard, a picturesque character who wore a broad-brimmed Stetson, a mustache and long goatee, a brilliant flowing necktie, and a check suit, and who was given the title, half in jest, of the "handsomest man in Ventura County";² J. R. Erringer, San Francisco representative of the Pennsylvania Railroad; Charles E. Hoar, nephew of Senator George F. Hoar of Massachusetts; Nathan Blanchard, who became a leading citizen of Santa Paula and of Southern California; E. P. Foster, later president of Ventura National Bank, and donor of "Foster Park," and numbers of Spanish, French, and Basque sheepmen.

1. From an undated memorandum in Bard MSS. Inasmuch as C. H. Thompson's map of Sept., 1867, filed with the Surveyor General July 17, 1871, shows 44,833.30 acres for Colonia, the above figures may refer to Scott's personal interest.

2. In a letter to Erringer dated May 31, 1873, Mr. Bard wrote: "Kennedy desires me to remember him to you and to tell you that he has sobered up and has joined the Women's Crusade."

After the drought of 1863-64 there was a succession of fairly favorable years in Southern California. During the early seventies the demand for leases of sheep land was very persistent. A Dubuque, Iowa, shoe merchant, one W. P. Large, wrote to Mr. Bard in January, 1873, after his return from a visit to southern California. After explaining that he had visited "the celebrated sheep man, Colonel Hollister," he quoted the colonel as saying that "no man can make sheep growing profitable on grazing lands at the price you place on the grazing portion of Cañada Larga (viz., \$4.50 an acre). He figures the profit on sheep at \$1.37 per head per annum, counting nothing for grazing, and admitting that the portion you offer me would carry 3000 sheep . . . a liberal estimate, the grazing of them would cost 85 cents per head at 10 per cent interest, leaving as net profit each 50 cents a head, or not over 15 per cent on the investment . . ." With money worth one and one-half to two per cent per month, Mr. Large considered such an investment poor paying business, and \$1.50 to \$2.50 per acre all that sheep grazing lands warranted, though he thought he might be willing to pay about \$5.00 currency per annum for 6,566 acres of Cannada Larga. These negotiations naturally fell thru, but land sufficient to pasture 1000 sheep could be leased in the autumn of the panic year of 1873 for \$300 per annum. By December, 1873, Mr. Bard reported to an Anaheim correspondent that "our country is filled with sheep and many farmers have not yet succeeded in securing ranges."

But Mr. Bard was not putting all his eggs in one basket. While Mr. Kennedy was on the hills looking after their sheep interests, Mr. Bard was directing the development of Hueneme port, whence he hoped to divert the Owens River trade away from Los Angeles. In September of 1873 he and his associates shipped a cargo of barley direct to Iquique, Peru, a venture which he hoped would be the beginning of a direct trade thither, dreams that were not to be realized.

The panic does not seem to have hit the sheep business as hard as might have been expected. Drought was worse than panics. At any rate, in July of 1874, Mr. Bard, replying to a Philadelphia party who had inquired, offered to deliver 1500 to 2000 good graded ewes at \$3.25, gold, per head, after the fall shearing. The customary terms on which men of capital participated in the sheep business were that the owner was "entitled to one-half of the wool clear of all incumbrances of taxes or what else," leaving the manager what he could clear net from the other half. In the summer of 1874, Mr. Bard, Logan Kennedy, and J. R. Erringer joined in a sheep-raising enterprise on the Los Posas rancho previously described. Their joint property consisted of 11,288 sheep of all

sizes and ages, 45 rams, about 100 goats, two horses and equipment, a house, stable, and tents. The success of Messrs. Bard and Kennedy in the season of 1874, when a capable Basque had charge of their flock, seems to have encouraged them to ask Mr. Erringer to join.

Just at this point it might prove of interest to quote a few passages from the printed description that appeared in 1874 on the back of the stationery of the Santa Clara House at San Buena-Ventura. "Southern California," it is here affirmed, "is the sheep raiser's paradise. Hundreds of thousands of sheep graze upon our foothills and valley lands, and there is room for thousands more. Foot rot and the fatal diseases are not prevalent here." The county's population was stated as 5,500, "a large majority of which is American"; they alluded to the "glorious beauties" of the climate, and declared that "Ventura County has the best and most extensive wheat lands . . . in Southern California." Improved farms could be bought for from \$20 to \$35 an acre; grazing lands at \$2 to \$5. Wheat for the past year averaged \$1.00 per bushel, barley 62½ cents, potatoes and corn 75 cents each. Milk cows sold at from \$30 to \$50, and sheep at \$2 to \$4 per head. "Our market is, of course, San Francisco, to which our produce is shipped by steamers." In 1873, a dry year and unfavorable, 250,000 hundred-pound sacks of barley and considerable wheat was shipped from Hueneme to San Francisco. The freight rate by steamer was \$1.50 a ton.

To return to the Bard-Kennedy-Erringer venture. Early in the game they bought an additional flock of 1278 sheep from one Houston, and incidentally they put in nearly 300 acres to wheat. In April of 1875, 12,000 sheep yielded a clip of about 55,000 pounds, or nearly four and one-half pounds per sheep at a single clip. The sales of wool were managed by Mr. Erringer at the San Francisco end. Whereas, in 1875 they were holding out for sixteen and eighteen cents a pound for the sheep on the hoof, early in 1876, when they were ready to sell a band that had been driven to Soledad, they were happy to take seven to seven and one-half cents per pound for the best sheep, and three to four cents for the inferior ones.

This was a hard blow, and one result was Mr. Kennedy's withdrawal from the management of the business after a solemn conference in March, 1876. In January, 1877, when the price of mutton was down to three and a quarter to four cents a pound, California was clearly overdoing the sheep business. Butchers were reporting in San Francisco that up the Sacramento River there were 20,000 sheep ready for the San Francisco market. After the 1876 experience, when Mr. Bard and his associates ran behind in their venture, they placed another man, A. W. Browne, in charge. But the worst was yet to come—1877 was to provide one of the

severest droughts in the history of the grazing industry in California. In March, 1877, Mr. Bard wrote to his partner, Mr. Erringer, as follows:

"I'm scared worse than ever. Colonia won't help us as much as I had thought. Don't believe we can get sheep to Nevada without greater expense than we can stand. . . . Have brought the wethers and fall lambs and all the early spring lambs here near Hueneme where I will nurse them through.

"Browne has killed all the other spring lambs. . . ."

Then began a strenuous campaign to salvage what they could from the wreck. They decided to dispose of about 10,000 of their band and try to carry 12,000 through the winter on the Colonia rancho near Hueneme. Four thousand five hundred spring lambs—"poor innocents," Mr. Bard calls them—had to be killed at once, and as many as possible of the live sheep sent to San Francisco via the coast steamers ("Senator," etc.), which arranged to take four to five hundred at a time. They were finally obliged to reduce the number they would attempt to carry over to a little less than 6,000. A price of thirteen to fourteen cents a pound for the wool saved them from the worst, for the San Francisco sales came to nearly 170,000 pounds in April, 1877. This probably included the clip from other bands. Nevertheless, Mr. Bard had been hard enough hit to force him to confess that he was "hard up" and had to "borrow money to meet his obligations." The ravages of scab added to their expense and trouble. The fall clip was rushed to San Francisco in October and November, when Mr. Bard and his associates needed the cash. There were 94 bales of it, weighing 36,200 pounds, but the price had fallen to ten cents.

". . . I can't see how we are to run along from this time on," is Mr. Bard's word to Mr. Erringer towards the end of 1877. "Our bank will not carry us any longer and [I] haven't money to put up. Taxes and rent due and nothing to pay them with, and I am crowded on every side. A miracle such as a heavy rain only will save us. Yours however faithfully, . . ."

How admirably those three words, "Yours however faithfully," reflected the character of the resourceful, indomitable pioneer!

In the spring of 1878 the sheep situation brightened perceptibly, when they could sell 45,816 pounds at thirteen cents a pound, for \$6,329.73. But, for the smaller fall clip of 39,000 pounds, they only secured nine cents. Just a year later, in 1879, over 250 bales brought fifteen cents a pound. The violent fluctuations must have ruined many perfectly sound sets of nerves!

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At the close of 1880 the partnership between Mr. Bard and Mr. Erringer came to an end. Presently a group of men under Mr. Bard's lead organized another sheep-raising enterprise for Los Posas and part of the Simi rancho. Mr. Bard himself took eighteen out of thirty-two parts; the rest was divided among D. T. Perkins, later an associate of Mr. Bard in the oil business; Barker Gummere, a Philadelphia banker; John P. Green, also of Philadelphia, and a few others. This "sheep pool," ewes, wethers, bucks, old and young, totalled 25,738 sheep, and ended in 1884. The hardest times were happily past and the pool was apparently successful, for there seems to have been about \$20,000 worth of assets to divide, besides the profits from the sales of wool. Perhaps the reader will recall how "the Lord blessed the latter end of Job more than his beginning," for, besides camels and oxen, he had fourteen thousand sheep—and a soul purified and strengthened by his misfortunes.

The development of intensive agriculture and the finding of oil in certain localities was to make the lands that had been acquired during the lean years of precarious sheep grazing and slim grain farming among the most valuable lands in the state that were not devoted to orchards.

Many were the tribulations to which these persevering and devoted sons of Southern California were subject, but we must not forget that the material prosperity of recent years, the abounding evidences we see on all sides of man's success in subduing the forces of a capricious Nature, are largely the result of the sort of hardihood, resourcefulness, and courage in the face of obstacles that was exhibited by Thomas R. Bard and some of his associates in the experiences to which I have just alluded. Such experiences are likely to make or break a man's character. Mr. Bard's abiding faith in the land of his adoption, his absolute dependability, his ability to inspire in others the sense of duty that he felt within himself, his resourcefulness and cheerful optimism, his willingness to make personal sacrifices for his friends and his community, were qualities which those who knew Mr. Bard best were the first to recognize. Contact with the career of men of such heroic mould renews our faith in human nature, and should make us jealous to conserve the heritage they had so great a part in winning, shaping and preserving.